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ABSTRACT

Nearly half of Quebec's municipalities have fewer than 800 inhabitants and are struggling with conditions of economic decline, outmigration of youth, and political marginalization. In 1991, a regional coalition called Coalition Urgence Rurale was formed in the Lower Saint Lawrence area to support initiatives that promote community empowerment, maintain community services (including schools), and enhance rural identity. The movement aims to develop a social agenda based on a contemporary redefinition of rurality. The rapid collapse of rural social and cultural structures and their replacement with a national technocratic system of production and consumption has meant that villagers are losing mastery and knowledge of the tools they need for local development. Individuals are becoming functionally illiterate in the sense of losing all social and cultural guideposts to the system in which they live. Local chapters of the coalition use consciousness-raising strategies and community educational activities to bolster developmental actions and strengthen often marginalized local identities. In the village of Saint Paul de la Croix, literacy education used the project method and the collective life stories approach. Participants regularly discussed topics related to local history, community life, and future possibilities. The discussions became the basis for a book that covered all discussion topics and expressed participants' pride, identity, and determination to stay in their community. By publicizing its discussions, the group helped to expand the village's growing sense of community. The renewal of rural communities and of basic education is bound up with reinventing social ties and human relationships to the land. (Contains 21 references and notes.) (SV)

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Chapter 17
CHALLENGES OF LITERACY & DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL QUEBEC

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EVOLUTION OF VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

When we first met with Alpha, the local literacy group, in the spring of 1992, we knew relatively little about the small village of Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix in the Lower Saint Lawrence region, which can be considered representative of the challenges facing rural development in Quebec. It is a typical Quebec lumber town founded barely a hundred years ago, now struggling hopefully to maintain its population by seeking new jobs and developing a new vocation. Certainly, we could have picked any one of a number of unique and dynamic village projects to demonstrate the originality and vitality of rural development, but we preferred to describe an ordinary, unremarkable situation in a "typical village" attempting to redefine its future.

Nearly half of Quebec's municipalities — 600 villages — have fewer than 800 inhabitants. Most must face new challenges of rural development, given prevailing conditions of economic, social and political insecurity. Rural decline, the exodus of young people to the cities, and an aging rural population are trends found in many industrialized countries. Keeping small localities (villages) alive and well is thus a central issue for rural Quebec.

To understand the evolution of village development, it is useful to trace major historical changes in rural Quebec, with particular attention to high population mobility across North America, and the efforts of rural populations to defend threatened communities. In the Lower Saint Lawrence region, the grassroots fight against rural marginalization has been waged primarily through an organization called *Coalition urgence rurale*. The first section of this article will

provide an overview of these challenges for the development of rural areas and outlying regions.

The village of Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix will serve as an example for the examination not only of issues in local village development present and future, but also of cultural challenges to identities and to the bonds that tie people to their communities. The local Alpha group is involved in redefining the terms of educational practices and strategies that it is employing to help give citizens a voice, helping them symbolically take possession of their communities, giving them full command of their social, economic and cultural environment. The second section will deal with these literacy practices.

The reflections at the end of this article explain how the traditional literacy practices in rural areas risk being ineffective because they lack sensitivity to the local dynamic and to the regional resistence to decline and marginalization.

CHALLENGES OF DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL QUEBEC VILLAGES

Decline of Rural Regions

Canada is often thought of as a wide open, thinly-populated space, ice and snow as far as the eye can see, and vast tracts of virgin land. To be sure, these are stereotypes, but they are in fact based on the scattered distribution of Canada's population across one of the world's largest countries. Yet, these rural areas are now dotted with major urban concentrations sprawling ever wider. Less than a quarter of Canada's population of 27 million is rural. Fifty years ago, 30% of the population lived on farms; today, the figure has fallen to 10%. While this is a phenomenon common to many industrialized countries, in Canada this came about in a short period of time and is reflected in the distribution of Quebec's rural population. It is important to understand this phenomenon.

Quebec is Canada's largest province and 80% of its population speaks French. It has an area of 1,535,,843 square kilometres and a population of 6,895,963 inhabitants, of whom 1,544,752 are rural. Agricultural lands cover only about one-tenth of Quebec's area. Farming in Quebec must adapt to wide climatic variations and varies from region to region. The majority of rural inhabitants are scattered among 1,200 villages of under 2,500 people. Most city-dwellers live in 100 cities of over 10,000 inhabitants, two thirds of them within the immediate sphere of influence of Quebec City and Montreal.

The Monteal and Quebec City regions cover 4.8% of the province's territory and are home to 72.7% of its population. Five large regions with resource-based economies make up the bulk of Quebec's territory: the Gaspé Peninsula, the

Lower Saint Lawrence, Abitibi-Témiscamingue, the North Shore and Northern Quebec. These outlying regions cover 88% of Quebec's area but contain only 12% of its population.[1] This distribution of Quebec's population is a result then, of far-reaching and fast-paced changes in occupational structures.

Rural Quebec has been undergoing these profound changes since the mid-20th century. Traditionally defined by agriculture, Quebec has experienced major demographic and socioeconomic transformations since the 1950s, when intellectuals launched what has become known as the "Quiet Revolution," a movement essentially aimed at catching up to the modern world by building up urban centres and increasing provincial government support.[2] The structure of the traditional family farm was undermined. The modernization of agricultural concerns led to the disappearance of less productive farms, increased specialization, and integration into mass production systems and markets.

All of these changes in turn led to a massive exodus of rural populations to urban areas, where most jobs in the secondary and tertiary sectors were being created. The Quebec government sought to manage internal migration through regional planning strategies aimed at harmonizing the distribution of Quebec's population by strengthening some regions. Specific regional development policies were introduced and in 1966, the government divided Quebec into 10 administrative regions. (In 1987, a new regional division split the province into 16 administrative regions to augment these policies.)

But the farm population has been shrinking steadily. For example, during the 1981-86 period alone, the farm population declined by 26.5%. The profile of the Quebec village has been refashioned by rapid transformation of rural occupational structures, rural society has ceased to be synonymous with agriculture; bedroom suburbs coexist with traditional land uses.[3] The flight of urban populations to the urban periphery over the past 20 years has been eating into rural zones in the belt around the cities.[4]

In the 1981-86 period, the overall population of the exurbs of metropolitan areas grew by 21.5%. This movement to the periphery was accompanied by a demographic decline in 665 rural localities of under 3,000 inhabitants,[5] causing them to suffer demographic and socioeconomic decay. "The least urbanized, most thinly populated regions — i.e. outlying regions — are the most strongly affected."[6] The balance of migratory movements confirms a trend towards concentric settlement around the cities, the so-called "doughnut" effect: the city core is losing population, the suburbs are growing, and beyond the suburbs rural municipalities are shrinking. The process is similar throughout Quebec.

The apparently irreversible waning of socioeconomic vitality is making these areas increasingly fragile. Growing awareness of the threat to existing communities is generating new diagnoses and citizens are mobilizing against this specialization of settled areas. Given that 46% of the population lives in municipalities of under 2,500 inhabitants, we can easily see the repercussions of this demographic trend on small rural localities, which increasingly feel their

development to be compromised. Analysis shows population losses of over 60% in some villages over the past 20 years, with the nearest town often struggling to maintain its current population.[7]

The shrinkage of the inhabited land area and rural decline prompted rural leaders to organize the *Etats généraux du monde rural* (Rural Summit) in February 1991, under the aegis of the Quebec farmers' union, the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA). After identifying the structural causes of the current rural decline, particularly the harmful effects of the productivist model of development, the participants formulated a new approach to rural development emphasizing the upgrading of human resources in rural communities, economic conversion "from below," the development of sustainable, environmentally-friendly alternatives and increased local powers.[8] In fact, analysis reveals a split between centrally located, agriculturally productive rural regions, which are faced with technological and environmental choices in areas threatened by urban sprawl, and the outlying regions, which are attempting to develop organized economic activities to replace traditional local economies, which are under pressure from processes of social and cultural marginalization, economic dependence and demographic erosion.

The strategy launched in the 1960s has not succeeded in overcoming regional disparities in Quebec. The specialization of the areas surrounding Quebec's large and medium-sized cities is still compromising the development of outlying rural zones. For example, the population of four of the five outlying regions has declined as a percentage of the Quebec total: together, the Gaspé Peninsula, the Lower Saint Lawrence, Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean and Abitibi-Témiscamingue have lost 5% of their population over the past five years. During the same period, Quebec's total population grew by 5.6%. The two regions which registered the biggest drops were the Lower Saint Lawrence (-2.7%) and the Gaspé Peninsula (-5.8%). This situation jeopardizes the future of these marginalized regions.

THE LOWER SAINT LAWRENCE

The socioeconomic situation in the Lower Saint Lawrence illustrates the issues and challenges for rural development in Quebec's outlying regions. The main resources are timber, especially in the highlands, and agriculture, especially along the coast.[9] There have been structural changes in the region's economy but these have consistently fallen short of the demand for jobs, resulting in a steady average unemployment rate of 15% and nearly 20% among young people (aged 15-29).

Coalition urgence rurale

For more than 20 years, the population of the region's highlands has been fighting to safeguard and develop its rural areas. As early as 1970, rural leaders launched the grassroots *Opérations-dignité* movement to fight government plans to close some areas to habitation and transfer residents to mini urban service centres.[10] A number of co-ops and community-based businesses were set up to counteract the marginalization of rural areas. Alternatives based on global community development and integrated resource management were urged against the government's primary resource exploitation strategies.

Twenty years later, however, local development initiatives have not succeeded in stemming the sociodemographic erosion of these areas. Some villages have lost over half their population in 30 years.[11] Underemployment has led to an exodus of young workers and college graduates, an aging population and reduced public services (the closing of post offices, the closing of elementary schools). The gradual disintegration of social environments is making any economic development initiative more difficult and contributing to the degradation of both the natural and man-made environments. These trends add up to a process of rural devitalization which has been a matter of concern to rural leaders in the Lower Saint Lawrence for several decades. The awareness of rural decline has grown stronger in the early 1990s and the grassroots movement has been channelled into the new regional pressure group called *Coalition urgence rurale*, which is attempting to break what has been called "the vicious circle of rural maldevelopment".

Coalition urgence rurale is the logical continuation of the *Opérations-dignité* movement of the early 1970s. Disappointment with promised development initiatives and persistent unequal development have prompted rural leaders to fight the weakening of their communities. There is more talk of "empowerment" over local and village development; citizens are holding demonstrations to show they want to stay in their communities; manifestos are being published demanding the right to live in the villages; rural youths are returning from the cities, disenchanted or searching for a new relationship with nature; city workers are coming to live in more peaceful surroundings. At the same time, a new sense of community pride is emerging and regional and sociocultural identities are being reaffirmed.

Coalition urgence rurale is developing an original rural policy to support proposed local projects.[12] In winter 1991, a broad consultation was organized on this policy throughout the Lower Saint Lawrence (22 public assemblies with over 1,500 participants in all). The movement's actions are guided by two general goals: to stabilize rural populations in the Lower Saint Lawrence and support all initiatives likely to promote community empowerment. They confirm the desire of local populations to stay on the land and exploit all its resources which implies stabilizing employment, upgrading services and enhancing rural identity.[13]

A series of resistance actions was subsequently launched: mobilizations against the closing of post offices, elementary schools and public television stations (local CBC stations); public assemblies, round tables, training seminars, forestry development projects (tree farms); the creation of local chapters of *Coalition urgence rurale* in a number of Lower Saint Lawrence localities. The movement is working throughout communities to shatter the backward image of traditional rural society and develop a social agenda based on a contemporary redefinition of rurality.

Loss of literacy in rural regions

Since the spring of 1992, *Coalition urgence rurale* has been involved in a variety of educational initiatives to support local bids for control over community development. It has called upon other institutions to work in partnership and organized twice-yearly general assemblies to publicize local development initiatives and promote policies to strengthen decaying village communities. Using testimonials, theme workshops, theatre and visual tools (posters, buttons, mailings), *Coalition urgence rurale* is attempting to mobilize community resistance through local job creation.

This challenge is a matter of survival for rural communities. The old local economies were more self-sufficient, allowing more dispersed settlement and extensive use of space in a predominantly agricultural society. The village was a suitable population centre for these scattered communities, which did not consume the specialized goods and services of our day. The village-based community, the family unit and the guidance of the Church sustained a continuous and relatively independent process of rural development.

The collapse of these rural social and cultural structures occurred over a brief period of barely 40 years. The drive to "catch up" and modernize shattered the old cultural systems, ushering in values and behaviours adapted to advanced industrial society. Modern production and consumption networks led to more specialized land use and the exclusion of some less productive zones, which were too far removed from major centres of industrial production. The new organizational and technocratic system imposed its own rules, shaped the organization of space and demanded new values adapted to the imperatives of modern economic growth. It became increasingly difficult for people to stay in their communities. Villages emptied; the suburbs of large cities filled up. The functional logic of mobility defeated the territorial logic of continuity of place and village development. Territorial economies, both local and regional, came to be seen as impediments to development.

Modern society is unburdened by this nostalgia for the past, this "obsolete" attachment to a land, a village, a community. The development of many small communities was compromised. The national economy's overarching rationality has no use for these areas which do not produce for major markets.

As a consequence, villagers are gradually losing mastery of the tools and knowledge they need for local development. This state of alienation, loss of control over the instruments of development and cultural disfunction leads to a loss of literacy. Social actors become illiterate in the sense that they lose all guideposts to the system in which they live. They become slaves to the imperatives of the productive apparatus and lose access to the codes which define the productive system's preferred or requisite practices. The complexity of modern economic processes and the transfer of control to increasingly specialized managers served to widen the gulf between the specialists, who control information and knowledge, and the population, which is uninformed and most importantly, untrained in the new forms of knowledge.

Thus, rural communities are being weakened by a loss of control over economic norms and mechanisms, and alienation from their own social and cultural environment; they are growing increasingly dependent on modes of development defined in political or technocratic terms. The individual's loss of social and cultural references is the clearest expression of the loss of literacy in village populations. Loss of literacy is a collective process resulting from structural factors of a social, cultural, political and economic nature which affect the lives of individuals. In many marginalized rural populations, loss of local autonomy contributes to prolonging a state of dependence, isolation and indeed incomprehension of the collective mechanisms that control their way of life. The loss of respect for rural communities gradually seeps into the consciousness of residents and discourages them from fighting against their own marginalization.

The fight against loss of literacy

In Quebec, consciousness-raising for rural renewal has proceeded primarily through sociopolitical strategies: writing manifestos, mobilizing citizens around political events (roadblocks, sit-ins), organizing conferences, setting up task forces. Growing awareness has led to the creation of study groups and action groups to exert political pressure and develop local projects. These democratic practices are the legacy of professional community organizing and community development efforts in rural areas, approaches which have developed specific sociopolitical cultures of collective action. Consciousness-raising strategies include economic studies of the local situation, the formulation of projects (to obtain grants under government programs), the publication and distribution of local papers. These educational activities are aimed at bolstering developmental actions and strengthening often- marginalized local rural identities. They are part of a movement of local defence and identity affirmation aimed at maintaining local spaces and living environments.

Coalition urgence rurale is now (early 1990s) also setting up local chapters to

educate village communities about demographic and socioeconomic disintegration and the need to promote rural renewal. In many villages, citizens are involved in a multitude of local committees, working to affirm their commitment to the community and promote projects to support village development.

The situation in the village of Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix in the Lower Saint Lawrence region is typical of this process. A local chapter of *Coalition urgence rurale* was set up in 1991. A number of local action committees and service groups had been created in the village over the years; they served to support a myriad of volunteer efforts dedicated to maintaining and developing the Saint-Paul community. The local Alpha group was among them.

Our involvement with the local Alpha group in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix in 1992 was part of this process of local resistance, identity affirmation and repossession by individuals of their general environment. Alpha's openness and enthusiastic response to the project made our action-research effort possible. They joined with us in a process of identity affirmation based on speaking and writing the history of their village. We undertook to accompany them in the process and work with them on this reflexive research project on rural literacy education. The project proceeded gradually over the course of a year. In this paper, we describe our rewarding collaboration with the local Alpha group in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix.

LITERACY EDUCATION IN SAINT-PAUL-DE-LA-CROIX

A Typical Village

A person arriving in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix for the first time cannot fail to be charmed by the panoramic view from the road leading into village, as it passes over a hill overlooking the small rural community. The first thing a visitor notices is the large grey church and its steeple. Across from the church is the main street, built atop an elongated plateau, lined by two rows of houses which form the spine of the village. A few side streets cross the plateau in front of the church; other roads branch out near the church, leading to neighbouring villages located 15-20 kilometres away. The village is surrounded by sparsely populated, undulating lands covered by forests and fields suitable for grazing — primarily dairy cows — and grain growing. Behind the church rise three large buildings: a huge rectory, the parish hall and the elementary school. On the other side of the road, across from the school, are the post office and a small grocery store. A little further, on the main street, there is another, larger grocery store, reminiscent of the era of the "general store," which was the commercial hub of the village and the surrounding farms on rural roads.

The approximately 150 houses in the village are still fine, warm, roomy

structures. Many were built over 50 years ago for families with eight or 10 children — sometimes more! They are inhabited to this day, although many have become too large given the sharp drop in the village's population over the past three decades; they have become the homes of much smaller, aging families.

There are also a few recently built houses, put up during the past twenty years for a few young families who came back to the village during the 1970s after working in the city during the prosperous years of the Quiet Revolution. A number of young people have since left the village in search of jobs. This process is not unique to Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix; it is representative of the situation in most small localities in the Lower Saint Lawrence, or at least the ones which are furthest from the region's urban centres.

Fundamental changes

The village of Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix is located in the Lower Saint Lawrence administrative region, in the Riviére-du-Loup regional county municipality (MRC). Village residents are in contact primarily with the three municipalities located north of the village on the St. Lawrence River. Forty kilometres to the northwest is Rivière-du-Loup, a town of 15,000 on the St. Lawrence. It is the region's main town. To the northeast, at about the same distance, is Trois-Pistoles, another small service town, population approximately 5,000. To the north is the village of Isle-Verte, population 1,500, a former administrative centre from which a number of families came to found Saint-Paul.

The municipality of Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix was founded only 120 years ago. It is therefore a recent settlement, as are all the villages located in the region's highlands, away from the river. The village prospered during the first half of the 20th century and reached its peak population in 1929 with 1,250 inhabitants. Farming and lumber provided a harsh and simple existence, under the guidance of rigorous family and religious standards. The self-sufficient barter economy allowed dealings with merchants in coastal villages and enabled the population to maintain itself. The chief occupation was crop farming. There were 112 crop farms at this time; the farmers lived from subsistence farming and their woodlots.

In the 1950s, the locality had a population of over 1,100. Rural life and agriculture were synonymous. Farming dominated the economy and all other economic activities in the community were bound up with it. The 163 families had an average of seven members. Over the last four decades, Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix has experienced profound economic, social, demographic and cultural changes. In the mid 1970s, the village lost half its population to the cities. The ensuing drop in births further contributed to the demographic decline.

Today, the municipality of Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix has a population of 442, but while the number of individuals has dropped, the number of families remained the same in 1991 as it was in 1951, at about 160 with each family unit now having

an average of three members. The farm workforce has also declined dramatically. In the 1950s there were 112 farms; today, there are only 14: 12 dairy producers and two beef producers. To develop, agriculture has had to adopt principles of industrial production.

Today, though production has increased due to more effective technologies and farm specialization, industrial agriculture can no longer maintain a large workforce without compromising its viability. The loss of jobs in the agricultural and processing sectors, coupled with the attraction of city life, has transformed the exodus from the farm into an exodus from rural areas as such.

Meanwhile, lumber is in a slump due to the international crisis in the sector. The forest was exploited primarily for timber, which was then used in pulp and paper production. The recent collapse of that industry has caused the loss of a large number of jobs. As the increase in service sector jobs is primarily an urban phenomenon, Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix has been unable to create a significant number of new jobs and retain its population, particularly young people. A few new businesses are trying to establish themselves by developing markets for their goods and services beyond the boundaries of the village. The rapid disappearance of traditional crafts and the recent economic slump have made fast conversion to new jobs difficult. About forty people live in the village but work in nearby towns. According to our survey, residents practice some fifty different trades, which account for about 53% of employment in the locality. Some of these trades are practised primarily in Saint-Paul and a number of people have to practice more than one trade in order to stay in the village. For example, many residents have woodlots to provide for basic needs; most have at least one. The unemployment rate is around 20%; 53% of income derives from employment and 37% from government payments. To a growing extent, the village's population consists of senior citizens.

Local activism

The present challenge in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix is to consolidate a living environment and develop a community which is convinced of the advantages of life in the countryside and of the need to become involved in the community and participate in social and cultural activities to affirm their identity and their rural existence. This dynamic of identity affirmation and local resistance is clear and enjoys the active support of a segment of the population. Of the 442 people in the village, over 90 are involved in a total of 26 committees working to develop, upgrade and expand various services which are important for the quality of life in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix: public services (volunteer firefighters and emergency preparedness), religious life (pastoral work in the school, in the parish, religious education, liturgy, choir, parish council), social and health committees (ambulance drivers, blood pressure clinic, golden age, young people, volunteer work), education (school committee, guidance committee, Alpha group workshops), sports and recreation (leisure activities, hockey, cultural events, golf), women's activities (*Cercle des fermières, Association féminine d'éducation et d'action sociale*), village planning committee (beautification campaigns), social and economic committees (*Alliance des gens d'affaires de Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix, Coalition urgence rurale*). These efforts are helping to unite the community against the threat of village closure.

This solidarity was expressed with particular force during an event which occurred during the past year. It happened on May 4, 1992 at a day-long study session organized by *Coalition urgence rurale*. One hundred and fifty people took part in this event and attended workshops to discuss current issues and challenges for village development. A number of conclusions emerged. The municipal government was called upon to improve the roads and promote residential and industrial construction. Other priorities were maintaining rural schools, organizing health services on a volunteer basis in order to improve the quality of life in the community, setting up a body to promote local businesses and jobs for young people.

On the agricultural front, participants called for the creation of a list of farms with no children to take over and a list of young farmers without farms, so as to prevent the abandonment of farms. With respect to the development of tree farms, they called for easier access to available forestry credit and the creation of a group to collectively purchase woodlots. In the field of culture, the priority was to put out a paper to serve all the local organizations and the local population. Tasks were distributed, notably to a follow-up committee, and in some fields to elected municipal officials.

It is always a challenge to translate the results of discussion sessions into concrete action. While a number of people undertook to act on the various recommendations, the village's economic and social recovery remains a long-term challenge demanding activism on a daily basis. The strengthening of solidarity in the village and indeed the region is also an ongoing challenge. Beyond the opinions and duties of each of the individuals seeking solutions, joint action at the local level is essential for the village's survival; it can be developed only in partnership with community and business leaders and elected officials (the municipal council). Some village leaders want to see the regional grassroots movement of the past twenty years take on a significant local dimension in Saint-Paul; they want *Coalition urgence rurale* to develop a base in the village. The hesitation of some leaders about the best strategy to adopt, the role of municipal officials and action priorities is prompting discussion, local negotiations and new forms of activism.

The debates and challenges for local development were framed in the following terms during the summer of 1992. To launch local and community development actions, solidarity would have to be strengthened and local identity renewed. At that time, the local Alpha group in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix did not consider these discussions on the village's future to be its concern. As in years past, the group's activities were based on teaching functional literacy. But

the group's facilitator, who was already actively involved in a number of local committees and in following up on the *Coalition urgence rurale* meeting, was interested in getting Alpha more involved.

ALPHA

There has been a local Alpha group in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix since 1989. It is part of the *ABC des Portages* project, which was set up by the Rivière-du-Loup school board's regional adult education department in cooperation with the Des Portages central lending library (BCP). *ABC des Portages* is an independent popular education organization accredited and subsidized by the Quebec Department of Education.[14] The local Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix group's approach to literacy education is in line with the traditions of the popular literacy education movement in Quebec, which, since its beginnings about 15 years ago, has favoured consciousness-raising over formal education.[15]

In the fall of 1992, there were nine people enrolled in the local Alpha group. Our action-research project was developed in conjunction with this group. Our first contacts with the group facilitator revealed that she was interested in a literacy education approach which could be more directly relevant to the problems of socioeconomic development in the village. She felt the Alpha group could become an arena or instrument for promoting identity affirmation, fostering community development and thereby enabling individuals to become more involved in initiatives for social, cultural and economic empowerment. It was with this outlook that the project with the local Alpha group began in the spring of 1992.

In our first meeting with Alpha, we identified the group's main expectations and together defined an educational project. The goals which emerged were primarily of a sociopolitical nature. The need to have a say, to create arenas where citizens could speak, to share ideas and options, to develop a positive but critical attitude all reflect a desire on the part of participants to break out of their isolation and gain a hold on their environment. It became clear that group members felt powerless, felt they had lost control over their own development, that their village no longer belonged to them. We interpreted the need to forge bonds of solidarity, to build self-confidence and personal independence, as stemming from the group's desire to regain control over its environment. Alienation from the social and economic environment is often expressed as nostalgia for the past. These expressed feelings and perceptions would serve as the basis for our action-research initiative with the group facilitator.

The facilitator was sensitive to these basic demands on the part of the group and wanted to pursue an educational approach which would allow participants to express their knowledge of the local environment and foster greater self-knowledge. Their vast store of acquired empirical knowledge had to be harnessed. Participants had to be given a voice; they had to acquire symbolic codes

of transmission to make that voice clear. The goal of self-knowledge implies an educational approach centred on each participant, sensitive to each participant's pace and learning style, capable of fostering the development of each individual's unique skills and abilities. To establish real communication and build a relationship of mutual trust, one must know the group's interests and main motivations. Knowing people means knowing their family, socioeconomic and cultural background, so the facilitator will be in a position to communicate with them on the basis of their real-life experiences and respect their values. The facilitator's deep local roots were a major asset in making the process relevant for the participants.

The local Alpha group's approach was built on these foundations, using the project method and life stories approach.

The project method & the collective life stories approach

The project method is based on doing, on action as a way of learning. Learning by acting is an expression of a basic empirical process.[16] The educational process is organized around and guided by the project: developing it, carrying it out, evaluating it. This approach cuts the gap between action and reflection to a minimum. Knowledge is conveyed through the activity and the questions it raises. A "relevancy principle" inevitably bears upon the knowledge being presented and the way it is presented. The group's activity or project determines the body of knowledge which is conveyed. Defined and executed by the group, the project forces participants to become involved because it grows out of the group's desire to transform a specific reality in a concrete way, to achieve tangible, communicable results of practical utility. The project method is based on the individuals in the group, their social environment, and their own real-life experiences, which they understand and influence. The resource person uses the project method as a means for developing self-confidence, solidarity and mutual aid, and to help each individual assimilate knowledge, know-how and social skills.

The collective life stories approach examines social reality from within with a focus on the members' own interpretations of reality.[17] Behaviours are understood in relation to the meanings participants assign to things and to their own actions. This is the starting point for all subsequent learning. In this sense, individuals are not prodded to overcome ignorance and false beliefs. Their perceptions of reality are accepted as valid and serve as the point of departure for a critical analysis of their environment permitting them to reconstitute their social reality not through an objective analysis of structures but based on their lives.

The method attempts to uncover the role of structural factors as the root cause of individual problems and pursues the goal of individual empowerment.

The adults are in an egalitarian relationship with the resource person and they are encouraged to play an active role in the educational process and to change the power relationships within which they operate.

During the summer of 1992, more precise orientations were established for the literacy education program, using these methods as a point of departure. Focused on strengthening cultural identities, these were seen as the driving force behind local development. It was important for us to develop an approach which would integrate as far as possible public literacy education resources into the process of mobilization, education and action led by the grassroots *Coalition urgence rurale* movement which was already involved in promoting various customized training programs and pushing for "recognition that the village school is a socially and economically viable force for community development".[18]

Project implementation

During the fall of 1992, five men and four women regularly attended Alpha's activities two evenings a week. The approach was simple. We invited group members to talk about their perceptions in three stages: their memories of the past (going back to the 1950s), their diagnosis of the current situation, and their forecasts for the near future (up to the year 2000). Different subjects were discussed each week: farming, forestry, business, public services, transportation, politics at the school board, municipal, provincial and federal levels, participation in the life of the village, family, religion, education, information media, demographics, holidays, recreation, bees, values, ideas about life, etc. All these aspects of community life in the village were the subject of lively discussion at Alpha meetings. On Thursday evenings, participants took the floor in turn to express their views on the topic for the evening. Notes were taken on the discussion, faxed the next day, and corrected and approved by the group on the following Tuesday. This procedure allowed the group to add information and also served as a reading and writing exercise.

In this way, the group members had an opportunity to express their perceptions of the village's development in the group and share their hopes for the future. The meetings were lively, with each participant spontaneously analyzing the themes suggested by the facilitator. The group thus discussed development in the village in a systematic way. The presence of members of the research team once a week to ensure continuity did not create any problems. In the course of sometimes passionate, sometimes nostalgic discussions, participants in the Alpha group gradually described the changes which had occurred in the village and attempted to define a viable future.

Participants found their voice. In the course of the exercise, group members could develop an effective and genuine discourse. Through this discourse, they committed themselves, became involved and engaged. All participants were

able to speak freely, to express their opinions, ideas, feelings, experiences, peeves, criticisms, questions, uncertainties, doubts. Discussing freely in a group, claiming the floor, listening to others are things which must be learned. Group members were somewhat surprised by the opportunity to do so in what was at first a more formal setting. The facilitator validated the comments of all participants and proposed rules of order to govern the discussion: going around the table and keeping track of the quantity, length and order of comments.

Group members thus addressed topics close to their reality and real-life experience: farming, forestry, politics, housework, etc. The village's profile gradually grew clearer, like a group portrait being dusted off so it can again be appreciated. As each person spoke, personal identity emerged and found expression. Each participant also learned to analyze reality, to more fully understand it, question it, transform it. Claiming a voice is a first step towards taking possession of the social environment and gaining control over living conditions.

Participants received encouragement and confirmation for talking about their lives and work. They were invited to relate their living and working habits, without being pressured. For example, the subject of agriculture was directly relevant to each participant: three owned farms and all of the others were living on a farm or had done so at one point in their lives. The question affected them and they wanted to share with others their reading of the current situation, their often nostalgic memories of the past, their understanding of the loss of control they have suffered over the years, their hopes for a viable rural future. Describing the changes in farming over the past 40 years gave them an understanding of the influence of structural factors on their individual situations.

For example, group members had to try to explain why there were 110 farms in Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix in 1950 and only 12 agricultural producers in 1992. From the discussion prompted by this fact, there emerged a number of explanatory factors for the profound changes in agriculture and rural regions. Industrial production has imposed on farming the imperatives of efficient sustained yield production for national and international markets. Participants also noted the mechanization and specialization of farms, the loss of jobs from the abandonment of farms and small traditional businesses, government development policies and strategies geared to urban centres, the drop in the birth rate, the exodus of young people and the rapid aging of the population.

The other topics aroused equal interest on the part of participants and prompted enriching group discussions. The discussions also served to teach oral and written expression. We noted progress in communication skills, vocabulary, syntax and spelling.

Producing a book

A few weeks after the beginning of the project, the idea of sharing the group's

analyses and broadening the discussion to other groups in the village was raised. Alpha's activities acted as a catalyst and motivated group members to disseminate the results of their discussions. It was agreed that by the end of the fall program, there would be a document reflecting the group's discussions in its 20-odd meetings on the village's past, present and future. The title was to be *Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix d'hier a demain* (Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix from yesterday to tomorrow). The book would cover all the discussion topics and express the members' pride, identity and determination to stay in their communities. They dubbed themselves "the craftsmen of the future," expressing pride in work and mastery of all its facets. The reference to the future testifies to confidence in a viable future for the village and for rural regions and to hope for the generations to come. The group's name therefore combines attachment to past and future.

In early December 1992, Alpha celebrated the launching of the book. Everyone gathered around a large table in the tiny village library. The room was hung with Christmas decorations. Every face beamed with pride. They were eager to see their book. The copies were handed out in silence. Each person handled the precious document with care. Their discussions had been transformed into a physical object. They started to flip through it with a thrill of recognition, connecting sentences to group members. People commented on passages or reiterated their views and they returned nostalgically to discussing the situation in the village. Memories stirred: this was their story, they were the characters. They had become aware of their right to speak; they had claimed a voice.

Shortly after Christmas, we learned that all copies had sold out in a few days. It was the talk of the village! The distribution of the book fostered awareness of the fight and helped focus groups and organizations on common projects for the survival of the village. A few kilometres away, the inhabitants of the tiny village of Saint-Clément occupied the post office for two months to protest its closing. The same concerns were expressed at La Rédemption and elsewhere. *Coalition urgence rurale* worked to coordinate the protests and to initiate or support local development projects. People joined forces to express their determination to preserve their communities and protest the decline of their villages.

REFLECTIONS

Rural populations have become more aware of the disintegration of their communities and many groups are developing grassroots actions.[19] Rural movements are organizing. *Solidarité rurale*, the organization which grew out of the *Etats généraux du monde rural* (Rural Summit), is working to coordinate these various actions. We have chosen to report on the activities of one local Alpha group in order to highlight the potential of these literacy education groups in the current situation. Many leaders have become aware of the issue of manpower training in rural regions and are attempting to develop original strategies to counter rural decline but these strategies usually neglect rural literacy education

structures. The Alpha groups are part of a formal process which often fails to take account of specific situations in local communities and of the socioeconomic environment of the adult participants. We considered it important to work with an Alpha group both to investigate the group's potential to support community development and to postulate other forms of intervention to nourish individual and local initiatives. Given the expenditure of public funds on these operations, home-grown approaches adapted to local conditions ought to be encouraged.

The Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix Alpha group's initiative is not an isolated one. It is part of the current movement of resistance to rural and regional decline. By a simple, unglamorous act, the group eloquently expressed its desire to stay on the land. The village was established recently, like many others in Quebec. A hundred years ago, settlers were encouraged to open up new territories, to clear new lands and live on them with pride. Today, their presence there is seen as an inconvenience.

One important conclusion which emerges from current local development practices in rural regions is that local identities must be strengthened and used as the basis for development initiatives. Cultural roots are a prerequisite for local development.[20] Sense of community must be recreated; positive identities must be redefined. For the process of community empowerment to begin, a lost and tarnished identity must first be recovered.

At first, the movement expresses itself through a negative identity which seeks to defend its own living conditions, progressing towards a more positive identity. Original initiatives are launched, special projects are developed, citizens reclaim the standards which regulate their lives and reformulatethem on the basis of the way of life.

The Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix Alpha group's approach was focused on expressing this cultural identity and sense of community. The process of identity affirmation embraced three facets of identity: the community's history and heritage, which is an object of pride and of nostalgia sustained by the major events of the village's history; a forward-looking identity which casts the community as a guardian against the destructive logic of a system gone haywire; and an identity rooted in experience and the relative advantages of the rural lifestyle as it exists today.[21] By publicizing its discussions, the group helped expand this growing sense of identity in the village, and this sense is gaining strength in Saint- Paul-de-la-Croix. Recent examples of community-based efforts and development initiatives include bees, the arrival of new families, economic promotion, holiday activities, economic and social activities. The high level of participation in the various committees indicates a vigorous local community life.

In the final analysis, this local literacy education group is calling upon us to redefine the state of literacy in industrialized countries, which are developing rigid and elaborate systems alien to human needs and aspirations. The loss of understanding and control over the system's workings may well be an expression

of a basic loss of literacy among many social groups.

The cultural challenge of reinventing rural societies in Quebec on a day-by-day basis demands a process of literacy acquisition aimed at overcoming dependence on a socioeconomic system which imposes standards and lifestyles opposed to the village-based model of local development. The renewal of rural communities and of basic education is bound up with reinventing what it means to be human in relation to the land and society, with recovering a deeply rooted living space and a community support system. The process of dispossession and deterritorialization of individual living spaces reflects a state of dependence and a dramatic loss of sociocultural knowledge. Becoming illiterate means, first and foremost, losing control over one's environment. Trendy talk about empowerment camouflages this state of alienation from our living environments, our communities, our own identities. Many villages in rural Quebec are engaged in this movement of rural redefinition. Saint-Paul-de-la-Croix is one of them.

Notes & References

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3. Jean, Bruno, "La ruralité québécoise contemporaine: principaux éléments de spécificité et de différenciation" in Vachon, B., *op. cit.*, p. 84.
4. Vachon, Bernard, "Le peuplement des régions rurales du Québec face aux phénomènes de dénatalité et de désurbanisation," in *Espace, population et société, Vol. III, 1986, pp. 85-94. See also Dugas, C. and Vachon, B., op. cit.*, p. 24
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12. La Coalition urgence rurale du Bas-Saint-Laurent, *Notre politique de développement rural* (Rimouski: 1990).
13. Dionne, Hughes, "De la région-ressources à la région-milieu de vie: à la recherche de nouveaux partenaires," in Gagnon, C. and Klein, J.L., eds., *Les partenaires du développement face au défi du local*, GRIR (Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, 1992), pp. 371-401.

14. Under the Programme de soutien à l'alphabétisation autonome (Independent Literacy Education Support Program). The organization has a Board of Governors and about 15 part-time employees. It receives federal and provincial government subsidies and also teaches courses for the school board on a contract basis.
15. Hautecoeur, J.P., "Politique d'alphabétisation au Québec" *in Alpha 90* (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec/Unesco Institute for Education, 1990), pp. 31-49.
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